

Hidden in full view

Why do thousands of people from all over the Indian Subcontinent and beyond come to Bahrain to work as housemaids and do the jobs that we won't? Nanda, a Sri Lankan housemaid, tells her story

By Danielle Simpson



"I was studying for my higher exams, when my sister phoned me and told me that she had lost her job and could no longer afford to pay for me to continue my studies. I would have to come to Bahrain and find some work"

So begins Nanda's story. Nanda is Sri Lankan, and until she was eighteen lived and studied at home. Now, Nanda works as a maid in Bahrain. She cleans and irons for three hours each morning in one house for one 'Madam', and when she has finished there, works for another eight hours in the house where she 'lives-in.' When she has finished the housework, she often spends the evening babysitting the children of the house. If her madam is entertaining, Nanda will cook and wait on the guests as well. She is bright and articulate, with a huge dose of optimism and enthusiasm.

Now 27, she has lived in Bahrain for nine years. She has an older brother, and a sister who until recently also lived in Bahrain with her husband and baby boy. Her sister also worked as a maid, and her husband worked at the port. Nanda spent every Friday with them and having some of her family here meant everything to her. A month ago her sister and family, had to return to Sri Lanka as the sister's husband was unable to get his family visa renewed. Nanda was devastated and spent days in tears.

Her employer will not allow her to sit down to eat during the day, and she's allowed just two ten minute breaks during her working day.

Nanda is far too intelligent to spend the rest of her life cleaning the houses of wealthy madams. And she probably won't; she is saving her money to buy land on which to build a house in Sri Lanka. This summer, for the first time in several years, she is returning home to purchase the plot of land and to attempt to retrieve her dowry from the husband she was married to, but who found himself another woman when she left to work in Bahrain. Life's not so good for him either; he lost everything he possessed in the Asian tsunami of December 2004 and Nanda isn't really confident that there will be anything left for her to take back. She returns in hope.

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When she was eleven, her brother who was much older worked in a hotel. It was unusual in Nanda's village, but he spoke excellent English as she does, and was able to get a good job. His family was proud of him. One night however, he went out with friends, got drunk and woke up to find himself sprawled across a railway track with the toes of his right foot missing. His friends could not, or would not, explain what had happened to him; their father, an alcoholic, was not capable of investigating; their mother, as a woman, was not in a position to find out what had happened, and Nanda who, at only eleven, suspected that this was no accident but a vindictive attack by jealous people, was too young to interfere.

Her brother lost his job, and his wife left him. He ended up in a wheelchair, with two sons to support. Their father is dead and the money Nanda earns goes to support him, her nephews and her sick mother. It also pays for her food, her toiletries and her clothes, and it goes towards her savings for the land she intends to buy.

Last year, Nanda bought her brother's son a ticket to come to Bahrain so that he could find a job. By the time he had, his short-stay visa had expired and he had to return to Sri Lanka. Nanda couldn't afford to bring him back again, now that he had found a job. Her current goal is to bring her baby nephew and his mother back to Bahrain so that her sister can earn a salary again as there is no work for her in Sri Lanka. But if she comes back, she will have to leave her husband behind as he has now found a job.

Nanda's story resembles that of countless other invisible women in this

country. Consider Prema, also a maid, who has two children back in India living with her parents. She sees them once a year. Her husband was in Bahrain with her but was drinking all the money she earned, so she sent him back to India to look after their children. It was the least he could do: he was contributing nothing to the family by being in Bahrain. She works fourteen hour days, and has half a day off on Fridays.

Julita is Filipina and has three school-age children, living with her mother in the Philippines whilst she works as a waitress in Bahrain. She has not seen them for three years. Her husband left her when she came to work here. All her money goes towards her children's education. She works twelve hour days in a restaurant, and does manicures in her spare time to earn extra cash. Her employer will not allow her to sit down to eat during the day, and she's allowed just two ten minute breaks during her working day.

None of these women are 'abused' as such, all have female employers, and all are paid generously in comparison to some. But to their employers - who should be eternally grateful to them for making their lives so much easier - they are invisible. When was it ever alright to treat another human being like this? Nanda comes back to Bahrain in four weeks. As with all these women, she does not inspire - or want - sympathy or pity. Instead, she deserves huge amounts of respect for her drive and determination to escape this life of drudgery ■

For more information about the work of the Migrant Workers' Protection Society: Contact MWPS spokesperson and Action Committee Head Marietta Dias. Tel. +973 3945 2470.



FACT: You are breaking the law if you employ someone to work for you and are not their sponsor. **REALITY:** A housemaid might be employed by three or four members of the same family.

Marietta Dias from the Migrant Workers' Protection Society (MWPS) says that most women who come to work here in menial positions are from India. Most come to Bahrain to earn money "to support their children so that they may have better lives." However, as the Domestic Employees Sector does not come under Bahraini Labour Law it is difficult to monitor whether the money they are earning does in fact reach their families. "We don't have any evidence, apart from hearsay, that they are in fact bettering their lives by coming to work here. Unscrupulous agents entice unskilled girls who have never left their villages with the promise of a better life in Bahrain. After a few weeks in a totally alien environment these girls run away from their employers because they are not equipped in any way to do the work that is required of them, and cannot cope. Additionally they owe huge amounts to the agents who brought them here. In order to try and clear their debts, many have to stay for five or six years, at the very least, before they can return home".